

Commemoration in Melk, 7th of May 2018

„Escape and Home“

Mag. Gerhard Karner (2. NÖ Landtagspräsident)

Commemorate, recall, remember, never forget, never again –

The annual **commemorations** or also this **commemorative year 2018** (80 years Anschluss – the incorporation of Austria into Nazi Germany): these occasions urge us again and again to deal with our own history – to deal with our history in a critical and brutally honest way!

And we do this, every year, also here, in this place: But the commemoration has never been this tangible, this concrete and this terribly close.

4884 names stand for unspeakable suffering and destruction.

4884 names stand for a terror regime which humiliated, tortured and assassinated human beings.

4884 names make it our mission to not let it be forgotten what happened and to always speak up for tolerance and human dignity in remembrance of the victims.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

In the name of the province of Lower Austria and on behalf of its governor Mrs. Johanna Mikl-Leitner I warmly greet you and welcome you in Melk.

Welcome to this **commemoration in our province**.

A commemoration which has added a new dimension here in Melk by creating a network with other memorials and events in the context of the project “Zwischenräume” (interspaces).

So my I would like to **thank Alexander Hauer and Christian Rabl** for giving serious thought to how commemoration can be, stay relevant, and continue to have an effect!

Thank you to the students, educators and all people who contribute to the commemoration. Thank you to every one of you who came here today to commemorate.

4884 names – 4884 human beings whom we must never forget, in the spirit of “Never again”

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Escape and Home (Laura, Lukas, Paul, Nina)

escape: n.: 1. The act of getting away or breaking free from (confinements etc.)
2. avoidance of injury, harm, etc.
3. a means of distraction or relief

Home: n.: 1. The place where one lives; house or dwelling
2. a person's country, city etc., esp. viewed as a birthplace or a place dear to one

Home begins on the continent, in the country, in the region, in the district, in the town or in the village and finally leads to the house. Alone, with friends or even with loved ones.

Escape begins with leaving your social environment, the house, the village or town, the district, the region, the country or even your own continent.

Home can mean many things: For some it is the feeling of love and warmth in their families, the feeling of being secure socially and of belonging. Others associate home maybe with the smell of a freshly baked cake or the barking of the neighbor's dog. Sometimes the word home can also evoke unpleasant feelings: memories of events in the past can cause grief and pain.

Escape can also mean many things: Sometimes it is the only chance for survival and a better perspective. Many people are forced to escape, others do so voluntarily. But escape doesn't only mean grief and pain. People escape every day: from the house, from the town, from the daily routine. You escape from a stressful life by reading a good book, by taking an afternoon walk through the forest or by spending the weekend in a spa.

Some escape from their home, others escape to find a home. You can escape from many things, but never from yourself and not at all from your past. But you can change, develop and continue to evolve.

Escape and home, both can be positive or negative, but they never mean stagnation. Both shape a person and let him/her grow.

17th February 1938: on this otherwise unremarkable day the story of Judith and Hannes began. They met at the weekly market, when they both wanted to buy pears. They touched unintentionally and for a long moment they looked deep into each other's eyes. From this second on they met several times a week. It didn't take long before they became a couple. Happy didn't even begin to describe their state.

12th March 1938: this day, however, changed everything: German troops marched into Austria. For Judith it was a very memorable day. She was Jewish and knew immediately that her life would change from that day on. She hadn't yet had the courage to tell Hannes about her religion, because his family were supporters of the Nazis. She continued to live with this overwhelming burden.

21st September 1938: the situation of the Jews became progressively worse. Judith's family decided to flee. For fear of her life and that of her family Judith didn't tell Hannes anything about their escape plans. She just disappeared. Without a word, without saying good-bye.

4th April 1939: winter was over. Judith had been gone for more than half a year. Hannes had tried several times to locate her, but without success. Time went by, but he didn't hear from Judith.

9th October 1939: the Second World War had already started. For Hannes and his family it was positive, because they supported Hitler. For Judith it was difficult. For an indefinite time she had to leave behind not only her beloved home, but also her great love.

3rd January 1940: Judith's family had succeeded in escaping to Switzerland, but they didn't yet feel safe enough. They wanted to go to America, but this plan proved to be extremely difficult to carry out. In the meantime Hannes in Austria still grieved for his lost love. Since her escape he had found out about her background and the reason for her escape. He wanted to spare no effort to find Judith again. Through his connections he tried to locate her, but again without success.

2nd September 1945: the World War ended definitively with Japan's capitulation. The material and psychic damages caused by the war were enormous. This was also true for Judith and Hannes. He still lived in Austria and hadn't really gotten over the separation. Judith had reached America and decided not to go back home for the time being. But for her it was also impossible to get over the separation from her first great love.

30th July 1956: the couple hadn't seen each other for more than 15 years. They didn't even know if the other was still alive. Both had tried to start a family and build a life. But all of their relationships had failed.

16th August 1956: New York. Hannes was in the United States on business. In the evening he had dinner in a small restaurant with his colleagues. Judith sometimes worked there as a waitress, as she did that night. They met again after such a long time and it seemed as if no time had passed. It was as if nothing had happened in between. They never went back to Austria, their native country. The couple stayed in New York and found a new home there.

Escape and Home: Chain of Thought – by Helene, Anna und Lilli

Your home is where your heart is.

To lose your home. The trust in daily life. Deeply ingrained in land, soil and traditions. Memories and stories, the heritage, the work, the efforts of your ancestors, all lost. The unknown, hopelessness and fear of death characterize escape. No future. Missing your own four walls. What is left? Family, friends, loved ones? They often have to be left behind. But still strength, faith, energy and hope make refugees keep fighting. Fighting for a future, a home. For Family. Strength and hope unite all those who had to leave their home or were expelled or had to escape or are fleeing right now. Escape and home. Two opposing notions, which include so much pain, but also so much love.

Dr. Med. Eva Umlauf

Dear ladies and gentlemen who have come here to commemorate my dear sister Nora, my dear brother-in-law Mirek, my dear son Julian, dear Mayor Widrich, dear Dr. Rabl,

for three years I have now come to the commemoration in Melk – and I will do so in the future, always in remembrance of my nearly unknown and still so close father.

The company of the people who survived from my once so big family is extremely important to me. Thank you, Nora and Mirek. And thank you, my sons, who indeed haven't experienced this terrible and murderous time themselves, but who felt it of course – without words, through the situation of my motherly soul. They distinctly sensed it, even if we have only recently begun to really speak about it. Julian, I feel very closely connected to you and I appreciate your company here today very much.

The commemoration in Melk has been particularly important to me, since I found out **“by chance”** that our father Imro Hecht was murdered in this concentration camp. For a long time my family and I believed that he had collapsed because of exhaustion during the Auschwitz death march and had been shot at the wayside.

Any trace of him was erased for us. After he had been separated from us, we couldn't find out anything definite about his further fate anymore, ... until I unexpectedly came across a, ... his trace in Yad Vashem during research for my book **“Die Nummer auf deinem Unterarm ist blau wie deine Augen” (“The number on your lower arm is blue, like your eyes”)**.

I read for you a passage from the book (from page 93 on):

“He actually survived the ordeal of the death march that lasted several days and the transport to the west in open freight wagons without sustenance. A list of new arrivals in the Austrian concentration camp of Mauthausen mentions his arrival on the 25th January 1945. Four days later he was “transferred” to Melk, a satellite camp of Mauthausen established in March 1944 where the prisoners had to work for the project “Quarz” under inhumane conditions. Without protective clothes and under most difficult conditions they had to quarry out quartz from a hill to build an underground armament factory. Only a third among the more than 14.300 prisoners in Melk were Jews, but they were particularly mistreated.

Melk, of all places. How often and how gladly have we stopped in the Wachau valley on our way to Bratislava! In the middle of the apricot region, in this charming landscape, we visited the Baroque abbey church, we ate apricot dumplings and we delighted in the Austrian idyll. But Austria wasn't and isn't idyllic, and the beautiful landscape can't hide this fact.

The wardens and persons in charge in Melk were no less cruel and no less sadistic than their colleagues in Auschwitz. I read about the cruel murder of a group of Slovakian prisoners who had been bombed from the air by the allied forces during their deportation from Bratislava. When they arrived, injured, in

Melk in mid-February 1945, they were not registered, but at the instigation of the infamous SS medic Gottlieb Muzikant they were put into an empty room, all of them naked. Without medical help, without furniture, without heating and without food. Muzikant came there daily to beat these freezing, starving men until the last Slovakian died “after at least seven days”. He embezzled medication and forced fatally ill prisoners to work. In March 1945 the food supply broke down nearly completely – like in most concentration camps – and the death rate soared. A “report of changes” from Mauthausen which dates from these days indicates the death of Imrich Hecht on the 20th March 1945. Cause of death: general sepsis, phlegmon right upper arm. A phlegmon is a purulent inflammation of the skin often caused by streptococci which, if it is not treated with antibiotics, can lead to blood poisoning and ultimately to death. If he broke down during the slave labor in the tunnels or if he received a lethal injection by an SS member – as the historian Bertrand Perz writes, phenol, benzine and air injections were “a method commonly used in Melk” – I will never learn this detail. The dead were incinerated in the camp crematorium; their remains were thrown into the Danube. Thus Imro’s ashes floated through Vienna, passing Bratislava and Budapest on their way into the Black Sea.

Not even five months had passed since our arrival in Auschwitz on 3rd November 1944.”

Dear ladies and gentlemen who commemorate here today: when you hear this, you can imagine how these events of more than 70 years ago **still burden me today** and you will probably understand that for me the commemoration is not only important in **Auschwitz**, but likewise here in **Melk**.

What happened, can’t be undone: as a psychotherapist I know this very well, also from my sessions. We all have to live with our experiences. The more openly and the more honestly we deal with them – as **descendants of victims** and also as **descendants of perpetrators** –, the greater the chances that we find a peaceful and respectful cooperation together. The more we are aware of the consequences of such family experiences for each and every one of us, the better we can assess the task. I would like to **wholeheartedly face this task** and welcome everyone who feels the same.

If today, on 7th May 2018, you **pause** for a moment and commemorate also in Melk this indescribable National Socialist breach of civilization in all of its cruelty, you probably agree with me. I am glad to see **so many like-minded persons** around me.

The commemoration’s topic „**Escape and Home**“ is important retrospectively regarding the Nazi regime, but also politically current.

- Back then many felt compelled to **flee from their home** and to settle down in a foreign land.
- For some even the saving **escape was made impossible**: a prisoner in a concentration camp who was exposed to death through work, medical experiments, hunger and illness, didn’t even have this chance to escape.

- During our alert commemoration of the inconceivable we should also think about the fact that, due to politically, ecologically and economically motivated **global refugee movements**, many people have no other choice than to leave their home and escape to other regions of the world to survive.

Dealing emotionally with experienced inhumanities is something that lies close to my heart. I believe in the healing powers of openly dealing with a burdened past, which is indispensable in order to provide a spiritual home for individual people or whole groups. So if we want to do something good for us, for our fellow humans, for our children, then.... according to the experience of my pain-stricken life, commemoration is not accomplished by artistic commemorative stones or by solemn commemorative addresses. Active **commemoration** is connected to a natural part of life on Earth itself, it is **part of the life of real people**.

Our state of mind, our feelings are shaped by the atmosphere in which we have grown to be the adults that we are now. This applies to me and my Jewish family as well as to every other person and group, regardless of which community they belong to. If we deal attentively and alertly with painful pasts, we can **transform** the experiences to create the future we want and that we are ready to shape.

I contribute by placing myself “at your disposal” in a certain way, through my biography, which is not an easy thing for me to do. Please consider what I say as an encouragement in our common struggle for a **peaceful and appreciative communal life**.

I am often asked about my personal wisdom. My answer is:

- We, each and every one of us, must **accept** our **past** – regardless of how cruel it may have been.
- We can't avoid **understanding** and **evaluating** it for ourselves,
- to **incorporate** it into the development of our personality and into our responsibility towards society.

For this we need **complete persons** with all

- their knowledge
- their cognitive abilities
- their feelings and
- their emotional intelligence

We need to be sure that we are not alone in our efforts, but **constructively and sympathetically connected** with our fellow humans. During **sad occasions** like this one it is possible. Let us benefit from this opportunity!

Thank you very much for your focused attention!

Daniel SIMON, Amicale de Mauthausen (France)

First I would like to propose to greet Mr. René Baumann who came here at the ripe age of 95 years in the same coach which also brought 70 French high school students to Mauthausen and Melk. Their participation pleases us and honors us.

René Baumann endured the forced germanization of the province of Alsace after its incorporation into the German Reich. To avoid conscription into the German army he escaped to Switzerland where he was later handed over to the French authorities in Vichy. He joined the resistance, was captured and in March 1944 he was sent to the concentration camp of Saarbrücken-Neue Bremm, then to Mauthausen from where he was transferred to the camp of Natzweiler in Alsace. In September he was evacuated to Dachau and then sent back to Mauthausen. From there he came to Melk and was evacuated to the camp of Ebensee in mid-April 1945.

The topic proposed by the Mauthausen Committee Austria and the International Mauthausen Committee for the commemorations in 2018 is Escape and Home. Isn't this mixing everything up, if you think about these words in this place? The deportation of thousands of slaves through the European areas dominated by Germany to the camp in Melk was not an escape, the reason for their status as Häftling was not an attachment to their homeland, and the Birago barracks in 1944 were certainly not a refugee reception center.

Actually this topic permits an enlightening approach to our commemoration.

The French poet Jean Cayrol, who was deported to Mauthausen in March 1945 and assigned to the satellite camp in Gusen, wrote the script for a film by Alain Resnais called Night and Fog. The score was written by Hanns Eisler, an Austrian composer who fled to France in 1933 and later to the USA. The film was watched by numerous generations of French students. The introductory words are, "Even a peaceful landscape, even a meadow over which the ravens fly, which is in full bloom and ready to be harvested, even a road where cars, peasants and couples pass, where you find a market and a church can lead to a concentration camp, just like that." Every time we come here from France to the commemorations in May we feel, in Melk more than anywhere else, a certain unease: your little town seems to have existed on the fringes of historical upheavals, protected by the imposing, splendid, venerable abbey and, for me even more, by the magnificent landscape of the Wachau valley. A Nazi concentration camp in these surroundings is improbable and unbelievable.

Moreover, the camp in Melk is not perceptible, because it occupies the already existing barracks buildings – from the abbey balcony even those who know about it perceive only ordinary roofs – and the Roggendorf tunnels, the main construction site of the camp, are not accessible to this day. Sure, every day the prisoners were driven by foot, in gangs, to the wagons which transported them to the tunnels and which waited for them at the end of the railroad stations so that the travelers would not get too close to these forced laborers. But the camp barely changed the fabric of the town and hardly disturbed the silence. Once however: The Anglo-American air force bombed the barracks on 8th July 1944.

So this perception I have is too simple, and it is difficult to imagine that the rounding up of 15.000 men over the course of a year and 5.000 dead in the camp (more than the population of Melk!) who left few traces except the smell of the crematorium, did not cause certain disturbances. I keep thinking that the town of Melk lived through the Nazi era without seeing the camp, this foreign object in this precious heart of Austria. For that matter, today still all the guests on the cruise ships which stop at Melk don't know this other face of reality. In Melk there is no place, or not yet, for commemoration tourism. I think that here the sense of the word Heimat is still perceived to its full extent: at the same time native country, chain of generations, wellbeing at home and also pride and sense of belonging.

Is this retreat to an isolated identity not also a mental escape, or in other words some sort of blindness? Because all the same, the Anschluss was widely approved (and I don't claim by a majority). Thus Melk slid into the turmoil of history after all.

Only a few survivors of Mauthausen could love Austria without reservation and even on the balcony of the abbey most of them preserve a certain embarrassment, an insurmountable distance. This even traverses the generations: it must be like that! No matter how warmly you welcome us, we feel primarily like strangers among you, because it is the only way that we keep in mind the most important reason for our presence here.

One year ago I spoke here about my friend Ernest Vinurel who was imprisoned in Melk and who I told you was living in Paris. A few days later he died, a little less than a year ago.

He was an unmatched guide for those who wanted to measure the weight of otherness and who wanted to understand what was beyond repair in the situation of the refugee. His path as a Hungarian Jew born in a then Romanian town started already in his childhood at the intersection of three languages (as it is necessary to add German here). Because of his political and cultural affiliations he also learned French, which is why he gravitated towards the French prisoners in Melk concentration camp. He had come from Birkenau where his whole family had been gassed and would never go back to once again Romanian Oradea where nobody was waiting for him anymore. He spent some time in France, emigrated to Israel, but came back, because he couldn't stand the country's political development, to settle down in Paris for good – the city which the philosopher Walter Benjamin called "home for those who have no home" (which unfortunately isn't true anymore....) Ernest named his two children Jean-Jacques and Marianne. For us French the message is loud and clear: Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the prominent figures of the Enlightenment and author of "The Social Contract" and Marianne is the allegory of the French republic. Ernest Vinurel liked to explain that he could never be Breton or Auvergnat, but he could be French, because it is an identity based on universal principles.... Try to convince a man like him of the supremacy of Heimat....

It is not necessary to be a Jew to feel like that: the French singer-songwriter Georges Brassens who is best known for his satirical texts and who was not a Jew, is still known in France, 40 years after his death, for making light of “the lucky beggars who were born somewhere” and who despise all others.

The words of philosopher Hannah Arendt are not as acid, but her judgement is not less severe. I would like to cite a quite long quote from her:

“We were expelled from Germany, because we were Jews. But having hardly crossed the French borderline, we were changed into “boches”. We were even told that we had to accept this designation if we really were against Hitler’s racial theories. During seven years we played the ridiculous role of trying to be Frenchmen – at least, prospective citizens; but at the beginning of the war we were interned as “boches” all the same. In the meantime, however, most of us had indeed become such loyal Frenchmen that we could not even criticize a French governmental order; thus we declared that it was all right to be interned. We were the first “voluntary prisoners” history has ever seen. After the Germans invaded the country, the French Government had only to change the name of the firm; having been jailed because we were Germans, we were not freed because we were Jews.”

Subsequently Hannah Arendt describes the mistrust and the disdain which the Jews living in France, Germany or Austria showed towards those from Eastern Europe.

Let us not forget the truth which this inextricable back and forth of identities represents: an asset and an opening evidently, and not a menace – in the past as well as now. To acknowledge the complexity of reality is the only possible way and the only fertile logic of human history.

That is why we note with satisfaction that the Melk Mauthausen Committee which for a long time was limited to the essentials – upkeep of the memorial, yearly commemoration – has now found the means for a new drive so that the commemorative work doesn’t falter. The difficult political context, in Austria as well as in France, will require our shared involvement even more.